

23 MAY 1972

Strife in Madagascar

In other circumstances a threat of civil war in Madagascar would get little attention from the rest of the world. The island republic has racial, tribal and regional problems similar to those of many young nations of Africa and Asia. But in this period of deep Soviet military penetration and of expanding Chinese initiatives in East Africa, what happens in Madagascar—situated in the Indian Ocean along the oil-tanker routes from the Middle East—takes on much greater significance.

For the moment President Tsiranana seems to have headed off civil strife by dissolving his Government and giving full powers to the army chief, General Ramanantsoa. But opposition to Mr. Tsiranana is now so intense that he may have to give up even his figurehead presidency. He seems unlikely in any event to play a significant role in bringing the country together again.

The current trouble was touched off by university students, demonstrating for sweeping educational reforms, including the de-emphasis of French culture. When workers joined the students the situation shot out of control and 34 died. But Mr. Tsiranana's decline began last year with a revolt in the impoverished south which, though brutally suppressed, resulted in the detention of the popular President, Andre Resampa.

Mr. Tsiranana accused Mr. Resampa of plotting with the American C.I.A.—a charge he later withdrew in favor of accusations of Chinese involvement. It is doubtful that the national unity for which General Ramanantsoa has appealed can be achieved without the restoration of Mr. Resampa to placate the south. The only certainty is that the general's efforts will be watched with anxiety in many world capitals, Washington included.